

## WHAT CHRISTIANS SHOULD KNOW, VOLUME II (#WCSK2), PART IX: THE CHRISTIAN WALK (SANCTIFICATION)

**How this Biblical principle applies to your everyday life:** Sanctification provides a practical guide for Christian living. Christians are not meant to be perfect but are meant to make incremental progress in their walk with God. Still, we vigorously strive for the high goal of holiness exemplified by Jesus. So, don't feel discouraged, because less-than-perfect performance is, in fact, quite normal.

### Introduction

Tell me if this sounds familiar. You do something that you know is wrong and even tell yourself that you shouldn't be doing it while you're doing it. Yet, you do it anyway. When the event is over, you look at yourself and ask, "What's wrong with me?" You then begin to wonder if, in fact, you are truly saved and if someone who is supposed to know God can think and act like this. You get saddened and feel too ashamed to approach God, pray about it, or talk to someone else about it. You especially don't want to talk to another Christian about it, because they may judge you harshly.

Or, perhaps you look back on your day and realize that you said or did something that was very un-Christian. You're shocked because doing the un-Christian thing came so naturally, so you begin to wonder if your Bible reading and all the church you've attended was all a waste of time.

Or, maybe you just feel inadequate. Maybe you look at other Christians (or read about other Christians) and think, *They seem to have it all together and I don't. What am I doing wrong?*

Or, maybe someone told you that once you got saved, life would be easy. The problem is that that statement doesn't reflect your reality. Even more, whenever you do take a step closer to God, life always seems to get *more* difficult and frustrating. Wouldn't it just be easier to leave God alone?

The purpose of this chapter is to address these familiar and common questions of the everyday Christian experience. It is a lesson intended to illustrate the fact that as believers, we will always fall short of the Biblical ideal until the final day of glorification in God's kingdom. Because after all, if we did reach the ideal here on earth, there would be no reason to concern ourselves with anything else. This assertion is not meant to encourage sin, nor is it meant to dissuade anyone from continuously pressing on toward the ideal. The bar is set high so you know where to aim in *the process* of moving toward a goal. That process has a set destination, but you certainly will stumble and fall along the way toward that destination. Just ask the great apostle Peter, who fell into the water en route toward Jesus, who stood on the water.<sup>1</sup> The good news for us is that when we fall, God is there to help us back to our feet.

The Christian walk *is a walk* because it is a step-by-step, incremental process. It's not a Christian event, and the process of becoming more holy and like Christ is a lifelong

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 14:22-33

endeavor. I've always admired the title of chapter twelve in Dr. Ed Murphy's *The Handbook of Spiritual Warfare*: "The Reality of Below Normal Performance." This simple title speaks volumes. Below normal performance is real. It's not a tale of mythical Christians. In fact, if you ever do meet a Christian who says that they have reached the ideal and are perfect, then shake their hand and say, "Thank you for showing me what pride looks like." "Below normal" will always be the case simply because "normal," or perfect holiness, is unobtainable. Performance means that we, as human beings, do actively participate and perform in the process. So yes, while sanctification is difficult, we are certainly responsible for what we do.

### **What is sanctification?**

Sanctification means becoming more like Jesus, and our sanctification is God's will.<sup>2</sup> Doing God's will (obedience) pleases God,<sup>3</sup> and the more we grow in our sanctification, the more we please God. Sanctification refers to the process of setting oneself apart from the world,<sup>4</sup> and holiness results from that separation. The only One to perfectly obey God's will and to perfectly obtain God's righteousness,<sup>5</sup> Jesus, is described as having a zeal for His Father's house that consumed Him,<sup>6</sup> and His food was to do the will of His Father.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the separation of sanctification is grounded in the truth of God's Word.<sup>8</sup> Sanctification is a progressive work<sup>9</sup> that is ongoing throughout our lives, and this is a cooperative work between God and us that makes us more like Christ and therefore free from sin.<sup>10</sup> So, whenever you think about growth in your walk with God—whether it be, for example, the growth of deep internal markers like peace, joy, and self-control or external markers like love of your neighbor and obedience—then what you are thinking about is sanctification. Notice, too, that external changes always result *from* the deep, inward change. And what is another practical example of what those external changes look like? The prophet Micah succinctly tells us what is "good":

He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

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<sup>2</sup> I Thessalonians 4:3

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 3:17, 17:5; Mark 1:11, 9:7; Luke 3:22, 9:35

<sup>4</sup> I Timothy 2:21; James 1:27

<sup>5</sup> And the simplified definition of *righteousness* is to do what is *right* according to God. It does not mean, for example, doing what is right according to society at large.

Righteousness is difficult because it entails being obedient to all of THE LORD'S instructions.

<sup>6</sup> John 2:17

<sup>7</sup> John 4:34

<sup>8</sup> John 17:17

<sup>9</sup> Philippians 1:6; II Peter 1:2-4

<sup>10</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 746; c.f. Romans 6:6; II Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 2:20; I Thessalonians 5:23

Regeneration, or being born again, is an event that happens at the start of our Christian life. Sanctification is a result of regeneration and continues throughout our walk with God. Christians are “all those who are sanctified.”<sup>11</sup> The Christian life is therefore characterized by continual growth, increasing holiness, and becoming more and more like Jesus. In many ways, the “normal” Christian experience is *not* characterized by where you are now but by where you are destined to go. This way, different people will take different routes and go through different peaks and valleys, but everyone has their compass set on the same location.

In a similar light, sanctification points to the fact that the Christian life is to be characterized by productivity, and that productivity will tend to be unique from person to person.<sup>12</sup> For example, one person may be an effective Bible teacher but is a poor administrator. They will be the most productive in teaching. Another person may render service through music but wouldn’t know what to do if asked to preach. They would be the most productive with a choir, band, or sheet music.

Even before the fall of humankind, it was always God’s intent for us to “cultivate” and “keep”<sup>13</sup> what had been given to us. These English words are respectively translated from Hebrew words that mean to “labor, work, or serve” and to “guard, observe, and protect.” The pursuit of holiness, then, is not limited to the individual or to exclusively “religious” affairs; it encroaches upon, for example, interpersonal relationships and one’s vocation. In a contemporary sense, “cultivating” and “keeping” is analogous to planting good seeds (e.g., raising children) that will bear fruit, which will then bear an even greater amount of fruit (e.g., training evangelists or co-workers at your job), and safeguarding the gifts given to you (e.g., responsible use of money and time and cherishing one’s spouse). Slothfulness is anathema to sanctification, as is incessant “busyness” without actual production of real value.<sup>14</sup>

The last point to make in defining sanctification is to detail what it is not. The pursuit of holiness is just that: a *pursuit*. Sanctification is not characterized by pure carnality. A life consumed, then, by consistent and overwhelming sin *without* the pursuit of holiness and *without* the gradual manifestation of fruits of the Spirit<sup>15</sup> is not a Christian life. Of course, many people will say that they are Christians,<sup>16</sup> but that proclamation without resultant works is a void proclamation.<sup>17</sup>

### **The three stages of sanctification**

Because sanctification is a process, it has a definite beginning, middle, and end. We are all born figuratively blind and in a state of spiritual darkness,<sup>18</sup> unable to see the

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<sup>11</sup> Acts 20:32

<sup>12</sup> See Romans 12:6-8; I Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11; I Peter 4:11

<sup>13</sup> Genesis 2:15

<sup>14</sup> II Thessalonians 3:10-11

<sup>15</sup> Galatians 5:22-23

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 15:8

<sup>17</sup> James 2:14, 17

<sup>18</sup> Ephesians 2:2-3

things of the kingdom of God.<sup>19</sup> Hence, the beginning of sanctification happens at regeneration, where we are washed<sup>20</sup> and renewed<sup>21</sup> by the power of the Holy Spirit. This initiates a change that turns us away from a habitual pattern of sin and toward Jesus.<sup>22</sup> Just as Jesus interacted with the blind man,<sup>23</sup> once God touches us, we go from a state of spiritual blindness, to cloudy vision, and, ultimately, to a state where we see things clearly. Of course, this change is only made possible by the blood sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross.<sup>24</sup> So, when Paul writes to the Corinthian church in I Corinthians 6:11, he says, “You were washed, but *you were sanctified*, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God” (emphasis added). This phrase in Greek (*tois hēgiasmenois*) denotes an activity that was completed in the past (were sanctified) *and that continues to have present results*.<sup>25</sup> A similar grammatical expression also appears in Hebrews 10:10.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, II Thessalonians 2:13 highlights the continuity of the process of sanctification (emphasis added):

But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation *through sanctification* by the Spirit and faith in the truth.

This brief passage also clarifies that those who are sanctified are sanctified as a result of the sovereign choice of God, and this choice is actualized by the Holy Spirit<sup>27</sup> and merited by Jesus.<sup>28</sup> Jesus is also the perfect example we look to as the goal of our sanctification.<sup>29</sup> Hence, I Peter 1:2 says:

According to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure.

The middle of sanctification is essentially the lifelong process in our Christian lives here on earth. Sanctification ends at glorification, the final stage in the chain of salvation. Glorification will not happen in this life, and we wait for heaven for this to occur. What this means for our present reality is two things: (1) A Christian is unable to say, “I have defeated sin,” and therefore obtain sinless perfection in their natural lives,

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<sup>19</sup> John 3:3; I Corinthians 2:14

<sup>20</sup> I Corinthians 6:11

<sup>21</sup> Titus 3:5

<sup>22</sup> Romans 6:11-14; I John 3:9

<sup>23</sup> Mark 8:22-26

<sup>24</sup> Hebrews 10:14, 13:12

<sup>25</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 747.

<sup>26</sup> “By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” The author of Hebrews also uses the word sanctify (e.g., 9:13) in the sense of ceremonial purity that allows a person access to God.

<sup>27</sup> Romans 8:14; Galatians 5:16-1, 22-23; II Thessalonians 2:13; I Peter 1:2

<sup>28</sup> I Corinthians 1:30

<sup>29</sup> I Peter 2:21; I John 2:6; Hebrews 12:2

and (2) a Christian is unable to say, “Sin has defeated me.” This is so because the process will not be completed in the present, and God refuses to leave His elect alone. So, at times, we may feel as if we’ve lost, or we may want to stay put or even go back to what we were doing. Yet, just like Peter went back to fishing<sup>30</sup> after he denied Jesus three times, Jesus found him where he was and did not allow him to regress. Hence, Christ tells Peter:

When you were younger, you used to gird yourself and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go (John 21:18).

We are “made perfect” in the assembly of God.<sup>31</sup> So, when Paul writes in Romans that believers have been set free from sin<sup>32</sup> and are dead to sin and alive to God,<sup>33</sup> this assertion is made against the backdrop that sin still exists and is something that believers should not yield to.<sup>34</sup> Hence, Peter writes in the future tense that we are to *become* partakers of a divine nature;<sup>35</sup> Paul writes about pressing on<sup>36</sup> and being renewed;<sup>37</sup> Hebrews talks about striving;<sup>38</sup> and James writes about doing.<sup>39</sup> In the end, effort is crucial, and purposeful resolve is essential. This resolve is dependant on God’s grace,<sup>40</sup> and this grace empowers us to forget what was and to press on for what will be. The defeat of the past may discourage us, but the steadfast promises of God are what inspire us to march ahead.

Granted, there are several verses<sup>41</sup> and a command by Jesus Himself<sup>42</sup> that essentially tell believers to be perfect. By implication, some say that this suggests that being perfect is therefore possible and sinless perfection is obtainable in this life. Yet, when we allow Scripture to interpret Scripture, we realize that God commands us to do things all the time that we repeatedly disobey (e.g., love your neighbor as yourself<sup>43</sup>). This paradigm began in the Garden of Eden and has continued ever since. In fact, the entire Bible is a testimony to the utter inability of normal humans to obey God’s commands. Hence, the command for perfection sets our destination, or the bar that we are to aim for. The wisest man in the entire Bible (Solomon) wrote, “There is not a righteous

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<sup>30</sup> See John 21

<sup>31</sup> Hebrews 12:23

<sup>32</sup> Romans 6:18

<sup>33</sup> Romans 6:11

<sup>34</sup> Romans 6:12-13

<sup>35</sup> II Peter 1:4

<sup>36</sup> Philippians 3:13-14

<sup>37</sup> Colossians 3:10

<sup>38</sup> Hebrews 12:14

<sup>39</sup> James 1:22

<sup>40</sup> John 15:5

<sup>41</sup> For example II Corinthians 7:1; I Thessalonians 5:23; I John 3:6, 9

<sup>42</sup> Matthew 5:48

<sup>43</sup> Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31

man on earth who continually does good and who never sins.”<sup>44</sup> This also helps to clarify how I John can tell us that “no one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him,” (3:6) yet can also tell us that “if we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1:8).<sup>45</sup> The idea that a person can achieve perfection here on earth leads to one of the most toxic and destructive sins imaginable: spiritual pride. This pride simultaneously elevates one’s performance to divine standards and annuls the requirements of God’s Law. If sanctification does anything, it reveals how imperfect we really are.

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<sup>44</sup> Ecclesiastes 7:20

<sup>45</sup> See also I Kings 8:46, Proverbs 20:9, James 3:2